

The Oval

Volume 10
Issue 2 *Staff Issue*

Article 45

4-30-2017

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Recommended Citation

Ziegler, Hanna (2017) "Just Write About This," *The Oval*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 2 , Article 45.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/oval/vol10/iss2/45>

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Just Write About This

by Hanna Ziegler

My family and I have a group chat and we conference call all the time.

Weird? Maybe.

Inconvenient? Only rarely.

I don't remember when it started, although I imagine it was around the same time I went to college. My older brother, Nathaniel, couldn't rely on Mom and Dad to keep me up-to-date anymore. It may even have been his idea for all I know. If I try and scroll back that far in my text history, my phone has a heart attack and kicks me out of my messages.

"Hi, Baby Girl!"

My mother has called me that for as long as I've been alive.

"Hi," I say, wrapping a blanket around me and curling up in what my roommate affectionately calls my cave. I am a Freshman and still not sure what that means.

"What's new?" she asks. I can hear her settling down into the squeaky rocking chair she likes to sit in.

"It's been ages since you've called me."

"It's been, like, two days," I say, peering out from under my lofted bed to check my roommate's calendar. In fact, it's been three, but I don't correct myself.

"Ages," she agrees.

"Whatever," I say, wrapping my blanket more securely around my feet. "You'd be upset if I only called once a day."

She laughs, and I smile because that's what I wanted most when I called her. At the moment, it's the only thing I feel like I'm good at. I try very hard not to start crying right then and there, and end up blinking a mile a minute.

"This is true," she says. "I can't help it. I miss you."

I am unable to hold in the tears at this point. They roll slowly and silently down my face. Not for the first time, I am grateful that my roommate has a social life and has no intention of coming back until much, much later.

"I miss you too. How are you?" I ask, trying to get the attention off me until I can collect myself. I have something very important to tell her, but I already know that I won't. If I can't even hear her voice without bursting into tears, there is no way I can tell her what happened.

We talk for an hour and a half. Dad comes home about half way through and Mom puts me on speaker-phone. Dad doesn't say much, but I can sense him on the other end, a large and cozy presence sitting in the peripheral.

I never collect myself, but I manage not to cry again until after Mom hangs up.

...

Nathaniel has this way of saying my name, like at heart we are still three and seven years old and he's still allowed to be whiny and demanding. It involves dragging out the last syllable as long as possible, which, over a text, extends to the excessive pressing of an 'a.'

I'm glad that nearly fifteen years later we haven't yet outgrown this.

Hannaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa

Thaniiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii

When are you coming to Bozeman?

This is from Nathaniel, who was about as ecstatic as he ever gets when I told him I was coming for a long weekend in October. What I haven't told him is that my need to get away is as strong as my need to see family.

As soon as I get out of class on Friday.

Ok. You want me to make you something or just go out for dinner?
 Food honestly hadn't occurred to me. Which proves how un-adult I still am.
 Fine with either.
 Ok. I'll make a roast.

I have no complaints about this plan so I respond only with the emoji that has heart eyes. He's a better cook than me, so there are no doubts of being satisfied with my future meal.

Nathaniel isn't the kind to say something he doesn't mean over a text, so when he responds with "LOL" I know he means it.

Oh, and I made an appt. for your car at 9am. Thought you'd want to sleep in.
 ... You're the worst. But thanks anyway.
 LOL. You're welcome.

...

My roommate is on the phone with her boyfriend when my parents call. I grab my headphones off the desk and leave, honestly glad for the excuse to do so. So far, two years living with her has turned out to be a year too long for me.

"Hello?"

It occurs to me that I always say it like a question, like the days of being butt-dialed aren't quite over.

"Hi," my dad says.

"Hi," Mom says from somewhere much further away.

"Hi," I say, knocking on the door across the hall from my own where my friend, Nicole, lives. We are sophomores now. "Hold on guys, I need a minute to get situated."

"Us too," Dad says. "Mama quit cleaning, your daughter's on the phone."

I ignore this because the door is opening. "Hi," I say. "Merrill's on the phone with David. Can I talk to my parents in here or will that bother you?"

It's a testament to our friendship that Nicole just smirks and stands aside, making a grand sweeping gesture to usher me inside. "I was just leaving. Tell your units hi for me."

"Ok, I'm back," I say. "Nicole says hi."

"Tell her hi back," Mom says.

I pass this along while Mom starts interrogating me about why I'm in Nicole's room instead of my own.

I explain. "Merrill's almost done telling David about dinner, which means that in another five minutes she'll be telling him—" I adopt the most sickening, simpering voice I can muster, "—And then you called and the best part of my day started."

My dad lets out a laugh somewhere between disbelief and sympathy.

"She doesn't actually say that does she?" Mom asks.

"Only every day," I say. We move on to talking about classes. There is next to nothing new to report, but I manage to kill about fifteen minutes talking before Dad interrupts.

"Nathaniel can join now. Can I add him into the conversation?"

I agree, resigning myself to the fact that whatever other things I had wanted to discuss will now be pushed back in the agenda. I try hard not to feel bitter about this, and as soon as I hear Nathaniel's voice, I'm not.

The conversation is light and general at first, but when Mom asks him what's new, he wastes no time in laying it out. "Well, it looks like Melissa is thinking of moving up to Bozeman."

There are no crickets, but it takes everyone a moment to react.

"Oh, that'll be exciting," I say. I am the first one to recover. "Then she can come visit me!" They'd been dating for about six years at that point, and she was as good as my older sister in my opinion.

"Does she know where she's going to live?" Mom asked. It's the nice way of asking whether or not she's moving in with Nathaniel.

"No," Nathaniel says. "She just started looking seriously a while ago. She doesn't even know if she'll have a job right away."

"Well I hope she finds something," Mom says.

"Me too," I say, though I can feel the mood of the conversation dropping. "In other exciting news," I say,

staring at Nicole's ceiling, grateful that she's left on some unknown errand. "I ran a mile at the gym today and it didn't hurt."

...

It's a picture of a truck that's lifted so high another car could fit underneath it. The picture came from Nathaniel, and because it is unaccompanied by any sort of descriptive text, I can only assume one of two things. The first is that he's still typing out the message, in which case I'll receive a novel via text in the next five minutes. The second is that he thinks the picture is speaking for itself. I'm betting on the former. I respond before the novel reaches me.

Wow. I'm sorry about the size of your penis, sir.

I receive no reprimand from my mother, either because she's at work or because she thinks it's funny but doesn't want to admit it. The response from my father is only two words.

No kidding.

But Nathaniel's response is the one that makes me laugh hardest.

Always nice to have an English major in the family. Sums up your paragraph in a sentence without even seeing the paragraph.

...

My parents get a puppy and begin obsessively sending pictures. It is both adorable and annoying.

They get him from an animal shelter a day after he is brought in. The shelter calls him Bam Bam, which, in hind sight, is still very fitting, but my parents decide to rename him Strider.

"Because he's scruffy and cute like that guy from those movies," Mom says.

"His name is Aragorn, Mom," Nathaniel says. I am no help because I am laughing.

Nathaniel and I affectionately dub him Little Brother, and Nathaniel laughs himself stupid when I start complaining about how spoiled Strider is.

"Not nice having a younger sibling, is it?" he asks over the phone one night. "Just imagine having to go through it twice."

Mom and Dad think this is equally hilarious, and I am left to sulk alone.

The next morning, we all receive a picture of Strider sprawled out on Mom's side of the bed, out cold. The caption is something about spoiled kids preventing beauty sleep, but I don't rise to the bait.

...

"How can you talk to your parents for that long?" my new roommate, Kyndal, asks.

Nicole and I are living together now, and it's weird having a third person around that isn't Merrill.

"It's been, like, two hours," Kyndal adds. "If I tried to talk to my parents for two hours I'd probably lose my mind." She must think this makes her sound like a horrible daughter because she backtracks. "Not that I don't love my parents, it's just they don't really understand the things that are going on here, you know?"

I do know, but I shrug. "We just talk a lot."

"Which is weird, because *you* don't really talk a lot," Kyndal says. "You know, in general."

"I'm just there for comic relief," I say. "They all think I'm pretty funny."

"I think you're funny, too" Kyndal says. "I just can't imagine it. My stepdad would get bored and leave. I could probably do it with my mom though." She turns to Nicole. "You don't talk to your parents that long do you?"

"No," Nicole says. "But my dad's really awkward over the phone. My mom's a bit better but usually when I call it's because I need something specific."

"I guess my family is just weird," I say, hoping to be included in that weirdness.

"Yeah, but I like your family," Nicole says. "You guys are adorable."

I tell my family about this later that night in the group text. Nathaniel is the first to respond.

Damn straight.

...

Nathaniel went fishing in -20° F in the middle of November. A Montana November, no less. I received several pictures of that trip and a few of the fish he caught. He's wearing an expression of glee unlike anything I've ever seen on him in a photo. His hands are that indeterminate shade between purple and blue that you only get in extreme cold, and I know this because his hands are bare and wrapped around a wet fish.

In November.

In -20° F.

Before the rest of us can comment on this, he sends another message.

Fucking cold today, but as of now no frostbite. I'll let you guys know when we're heading back into town.

I can only imagine the kind of fear this strikes in our mother, but she only tells him to stay safe. I don't see these messages until several hours after the conversation, so I don't say anything at all.

When Nathaniel gets back from his trip he starts a group call. We talk about everything except frostbite. My boyfriend, Chase, comes over when I'm still on the phone. My parents and I have moved on to talking about me and my fear of not getting into grad school.

"Well if worse comes to worst," I say. "Maybe I could be a comedian. I'm funny, right?"

My parents don't laugh, though they are amused. Even Nathaniel is quiet.

"Ouch," I say. "I'm wounded."

Now they laugh, and I feel obligated to tell them that it bothers me how much my pain and suffering amuse them.

"Oh, you are so full of it," Mom says.

"At least Chase thinks I'm funny," I say, looking at him over my shoulder. "Don't you, Chase?"

Chase does not take his eyes off his book, because he knows I'm not really talking to him. "Of course, love," he says.

"See?" I say.

But my dad is laughing hard now. "Wow," he says. "You've got him trained well."

"Actually, there was no training involved," I say. "He just came that way."

The "he" in question grins over his book.

Mom's voice is bordering on serious when she says, "Keep him. Training is never over. Isn't that right, Gar?"

It's my turn to laugh hard.

It's been a fairly productive conversation by my standards. We've talked about everyone's work and social lives, and how Mom's progressing after her knee surgery. Nathaniel has been talking about needing to go eat dinner for almost an hour but keeps coming up with other things to talk about. Or maybe that's Mom, sometimes it's hard to tell.

"Uh oh," he says. "Guys I really have to go now. Melissa just pulled out the Nutella."

I'm still laughing about this five minutes later.

...

Are you guys still awake?

I'm expecting that no answer will be answer enough, but I'm still waiting. As per usual, it's Nathaniel that responds first.

I'm still up. Want to call?

I don't even text him back.

"What's up?" he says instead of hello.

"I need help," I say, grabbing a notepad and sitting down for a productive talk. "I don't know what to write about."

"Oh," he says. "I thought it was something serious." He isn't a stranger to these kinds of conversations.

"It is serious," I say. "It has to be non-fiction."

"Non-fiction?" The disgust is evident. "Why?"

I make a face, knowing full well that he can't see it. "What's wrong with non-fiction?"

"Well why waste paper on something boring when you can make up something even better?" he asks. "It's just not as fun."

I'm spared answering this by a text from our parents, saying they are free to chat. I add them into the call.

"Hanna needs help with a prompt," Nathaniel says. "It's gotta be non-fiction."

"Non-fiction?" Dad asks. "Why?"

"Because," I say, slightly irritated now. "I always do fiction, but I wanted something different."

Mom is no stranger to these requests either, but her next words are almost as unhelpful as Nathaniel's. "Well you could write about your feelings on funding in the English department," she says. "That should keep you going for a while."

"Wait, what?" I ask, but Nathaniel's already saying something else.

"Why don't you do something about the history of the National Parks?"

I'm starting to think that I've made a mistake calling them since no one seems to get what I'm trying to do.

"I think you guys are missing the point," I say. "It's not like an essay."

Dad is the first one to cotton on. "Oh," he says. "So, like an autobiography?"

"Yeah."

"Oh." This comes from both Mom and Nathaniel and we all laugh.

"Well, that's not so bad," Nathaniel says. "Do you have any ideas?"

If I had any ideas, I wouldn't have called, but they all know this so I say something else. "No. I'm a little busy freaking out about what I'm going to do with my life."

"Ha! Get used to it, sis," he says. "You could write about that, though. The Quest for the Next Thing."

Because it is the single most productive thing anyone has said in the last five minutes, I write it down, taking some liberties with the title.

Meanwhile, Mom disagrees. "No, it should be something about accomplishments. Why don't you write about being an overachiever?"

I feel obligated to write this down too because it came from my mother, but even as I do so I chide them.

"You guys are being ridiculously unhelpful. Could you take this seriously, maybe?"

"Oh, come on, Hanna," Mom says. "I think it's a great idea."

"Of course you do."

"Did you ever finish your application for Pace?"

I'm surprised by this change of topic, so it takes me a second to respond. "Uh, no."

Nathaniel and Dad are silent now, but Mom is persistent. "Well, are you going to?"

"No. I think I told you that, actually."

"Was that the one with typos on their website?" Nathaniel asked.

"That would have been funny," Dad says.

"Yeah," Nathaniel says. "Hi, I'm a prospective student desirous of entering the editing field. I also found a typo on your page. Please accept me."

"And pay me, because I did something for you," I say.

"There's another idea, Hanna," Mom says. "How to be a freelance editor."

"More like how NOT to be a freelance editor," Nathaniel says.

I'm laughing, but this isn't the conversation I was expecting to have.

"Why don't you just write about writer's block?" Dad asks.

"Because I don't like that idea," I say. I start doodling on my notepad since I'm not really using it for anything else.

"Well if you aren't going to take our suggestions, maybe we should just go to bed," Mom says. "I'm happy to just go to bed."

"No." It's whiny, and we all know it, but fortunately they all forgive me. "I'm just not motivated by that," I explain.

"Yeah," Nathaniel says. "Nothing beats work without a purpose."

"What's our list look like?" Mom says.

I clear my throat and adopt a haughty voice. "The Perpetual State of Finding the Next Thing. How to be an Overachiever. How NOT to Become a Freelance Editor. For the Love of God, Please Hire Me. And, The Struggle of Work Without a Purpose, subtitled Writer's Block."

"See," she says. "That's a great list."

"But if all else fails," Nathaniel says. "You can always just write about this."